

After Arab Spring, Then What?
Posted On:December 31, 1969

I was in College (UCLA) during Prague Spring, the peaceful demonstrations by the Czechs against their Soviet occupation. We cheered them on\227and then saw how the Russians dealt with it\227tanks and executions. The West looked the other way and the rebellion was crushed.

Now we have seen another round of \223springs,\224 this time roiling the Muslim Arab world.

Iran (non-Arab) was the first to stage such youth-based protests against their fraudulent election in 2009. It was put down with violence, and successive attempts have been shut down outside the view of world press. That one is still simmering underground and will undoubtedly explode again.

But now two (relatively) peaceful Arab revolts, Tunisian and Egyptian, have unseated their heads of state after their four-decade long reigns. Less successful are the uprisings in Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and Syria. As of this writing, we don\222t know if they will produce more democratic governments, or if they will be put down as were the uprisings that roiled Europe in 1848.

But for you optimists who expect a brave new world after giving \223power to the people,\224 think again. These people are no different than their governments; the values are the same: might is right, patriarchy is not questioned, revenge is king, and religion supports tradition. But there are some minor differences.

\225 Two Kinds of States. Tom Friedman reminded us that there are two kinds of states in the Arab world: those with a long history of nationhood that predated Islam (Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Morocco), and those artificially created states, mostly after the two World Wars (Jordan, Iraq, Libya, Algeria). In none of these states did democracy survive infancy. Only Azerbaijan, a non-Arab Muslim state, produced a real democracy for two years, before the Soviets strangled it in its cradle in 1921.

\225 Monarchs or Dictators. The states with kings (or Emirs or Sheikhs), such as the Gulf States, Morocco, and Jordan, have better relationships with their people because there is at least a bit of consultation with clan or tribal leaders, and some (like the Saudis) have an institution of petitions directly to the king. Discontent in these countries is more likely to be resolved without major bloodshed.

Some kings (Libya and Egypt once) were replaced by dictators, most of whom began with national socialist principles (anti-colonialist and usually pro-Russian). These dictators, no matter how heroic in their beginnings, ruled for much too long and became corrupt and out of touch. They prevented any likely opponents from rising, appointed relatives and cronies to all positions of power, and have not only created police states, but incompetent ones at that. Every one of them suffers from failed economies.

\225 Islam. Dictators and kings have used Islam when convenient to rally people around the flag (and distract them from their own misdeeds). During the Cold War, the West made the mistake of adopting the Arab notion that \223the enemy of my enemy is my friend.\224 Religion was the enemy of Communism, therefore Islam must be the West\222s friend. In addition, even nominally Muslim dictators found it convenient to demonize Israel as a distraction from their own bad governance.

However, when militant Islam threatened their own rule, dictators arrested, locked up, and executed them (Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Syria, and Jordan). Islam can also be blamed for failed economies: bad educational systems, suppression of women, and runaway birth rates do not create modern states.

\225 Liberal or Illiberal Democracy. Some of these countries are planning elections. The question will be what kind of democracy will this produce: one man, one vote, one time? Or will it be a genuinely growing representative government with protections for minorities, separation of Islam from state, equality for women (sore issue in that world), and independent judiciary and press? It would be nice to see no more \223dictators for life\224 too. However, I don\222t expect that giving \223power to the people\224 will produce our kind of democracy. The cure for the people\222s misery will only come when the birthrate declines and women are freed to participate in a modern state.

675 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of \223How Do You Know That?\224 Contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com